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25 February 1980

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: Stability in Tehran if Khomeini Dies Prior to Hostages' Release

We believe there would be little immediate threat to the hostages should Ayatollah Khomeini die prior to their release. The hostages are likely to be ignored during the mourning demonstrations following Khomeini's death. Khomeini's more fanatical followers might attack the Embassy during these demonstrations, but we believe such an attack unlikely. (S)

In the longer term, the danger to the hostages will increase because political groups vying for Khomeini's legacy of opposition to the US and the Shah may try to capitalize on the continuing hostage crisis. The militants in the Embassy and their clerical supporters are likely to call for renewed demonstrations or trials of the hostages. Neither the unreliable security forces, nor the captors would be likely to defend the hostages from an attack by a determined crowd. Without Khomeini's ultimate authority over the militants, the chances for a peaceful, negotiated solution to the crisis will diminish. (S)

Discussion

The hostages at the Embassy in Tehran are likely to be ignored in the immediate aftermath of Khomeini's death. Massive public demonstrations throughout Iran will focus public emotions on the theme of loss and grief. The emotions of sorrow, guilt, and purgation which are characteristic of Shia Islam will stimulate the public mourning. This expression is typically inward-directed, exemplified by the self-flagellation which occurs at the high point of the Shia religious year. Demonstrations against the US are unlikely during the first stages of public mourning. Outward-directed anger and vengeance are not characteristic of the religious themes which will predominate before and immediately after Khomeini's funeral. (U)

* This memorandum was prepared by the Iran Task Force. Comments and queries may be addressed to Chief, Iran Task Force

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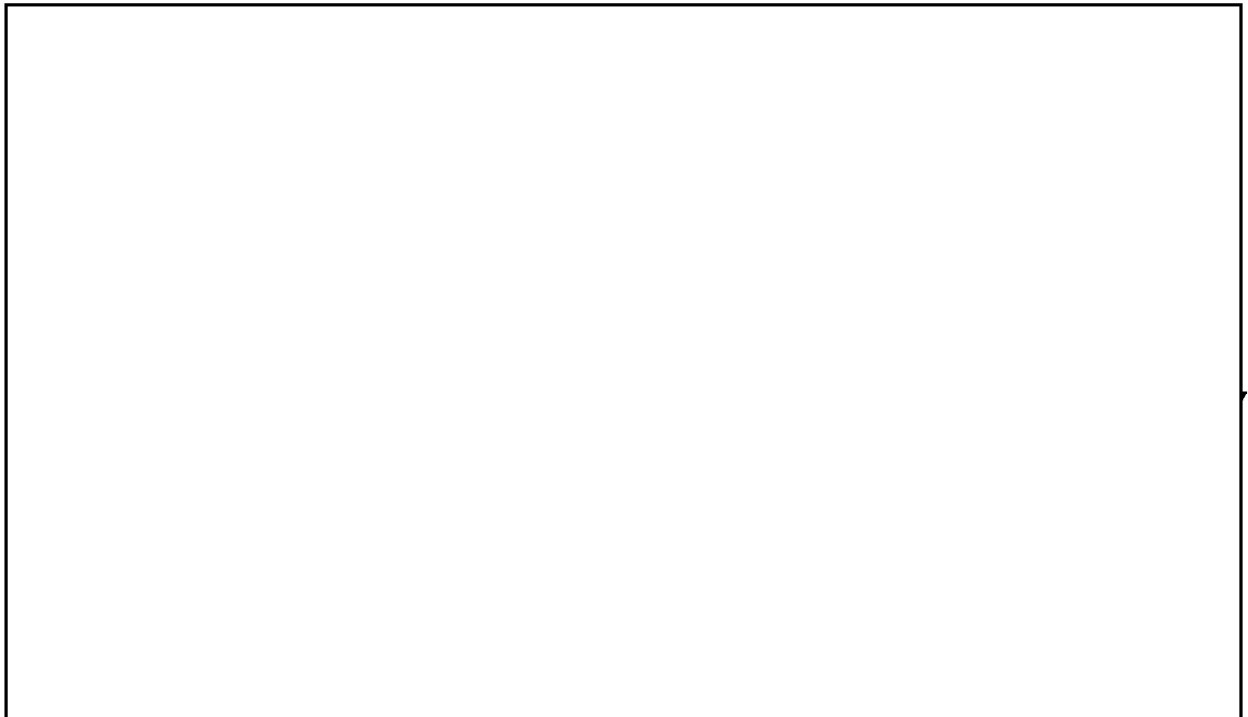
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Nevertheless, violence toward the hostages cannot be entirely ruled out. The security forces in Tehran will be unable to control the massive public demonstrations which are likely to number two million or more. Some group of Khomeini's more fanatical followers may attempt to direct the emotions of the crowd against the Embassy and the hostages. We believe the chances of such an incident occurring in the first few days after Khomeini's death are low, however. (S)

In the weeks following Khomeini's death, chances for a negotiated and peaceful solution to the hostage crisis will diminish and the danger to the hostages will increase. Rival political and clerical factions are likely to vie for Khomeini's legacy of opposition to the US and the Shah. The militants at the Embassy, having lost Khomeini as their key source of support, are likely to attempt to keep public attention focused on US "crimes," probably through renewed calls for trials of the hostages. Demonstrations at the Embassy could be called for by the militants and supported by political or clerical leaders seeking to distract public attention from the heightened disarray in the government. (S)

Security forces in Tehran will be unreliable and probably incapable of preventing a concerted effort to stage massive demonstrations or attack the Embassy. None are well trained in crowd control. (S)

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--Police and gendarmerie units in Tehran have been extensively purged since the revolution. There are apparently only headquarters personnel from the gendarmerie in the city. Police are patrolling the streets but reportedly their morale and effectiveness is low. (S)

Most military and Revolutionary Guard units in Tehran probably would refuse orders to suppress a mob of mourners. The others would provide only a small margin of safety for the hostages unless a major religious leader, such as Ayatollah Shariat-Madari, called for moderation and protection of the hostages. The captors at the Embassy probably would be unwilling to defend the hostages against a determined mob. (S)

- 3 -

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